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The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
KATHLEEN BLISS

13*th June*, 1945

DEAR MEMBER,

The religious broadcasting department of the B.B.C. is observing the week of June 17–25 as "Home Week." At the same time the British Council of Churches is sponsoring a series of "Home and Family Weeks" in various parts of the country.[1]

FAMILY PROPAGANDA

Christians are not alone in emphasizing the importance of family life to the well-being of the nation. If they were, the task would be beyond their strength. The disruptive forces breaking up family life are formidable, as Dr. Mace made clear in a recent Supplement (No. 231); but there are other agencies besides those specifically Christian working to restore family life, to make marriage happier, to improve the care of children, and to encourage larger families.

The London Marriage Guidance Centre [2] has in its two years of work proved that expert advice is eagerly received, and that it can save many couples from drifting apart and set them on the road to a new relationship: other centres are beginning work in other towns, and an immense field lies open if the funds and the right staff can be found. The Marriage Guidance Council which sponsors these centres is founded on Christian presuppositions. The Peckham Health Centre, on the other hand, was based on the biological premise that the family is nature's way of creating and preserving life, which men flout at their peril; its aim was, therefore, to build up the physical and mental health of families (to whom alone membership was open) rather than of individuals. Before the war it was not widely known and came in for trenchant criticism. War circumstances compelled it to close down. Since then books [3] about it have sold like hot cakes, and the biologists who are its moving spirits feel that they have a prophetic message and have been lecturing to enthusiastic groups, some of whom intend to start local health centres on the same lines when conditions permit.

[1] Particulars, including an outline of suggestions, may be obtained from the British Council of Churches, 56 Bloomsbury Street, London, W.C. 1.

[2] 78 Duke Street, W. 1.

[3] The Peckham Experiment, by Innes Pearse and L. C. Crocker, to which attention was drawn in C.N-L. Supplement No. 202, is now published in a cheap edition at 5s.

This response reflects a change in the thinking of thousands of ordinary people about family life. Reft from their own homes and plunged into the large-scale community life of the Forces or war industry, or compelled to share someone else's home, or separated from children by evacuation, they are prepared to agree that family life is very good, and ready to listen to anyone who shows a disinterested desire to help them to make it even better. This new evaluation of family life is reflected in articles and correspondence about every aspect of family life in the popular press: in films: and most concretely in the rise in the birth-rate maintained throughout the war, in sharp contrast with the war of 1914–18. Experts are responding to this awakening desire for better family life. In introducing an important survey by ten population experts, Lord Horder writes: "To help the people of this land to reconstitute their family life is the purpose of this book." [1]

There are thus indications that we shall move towards larger families, towards a social life centred more than in the past on home-life, and towards a revival of neighbourhood. We shall see Government policy, Left or Right, encouraging these trends. A start has been made in the Bill for Family Allowances now before Parliament. It should perhaps be noted that the desire to have a good time with no restraints before marriage is often expressed by young men and women who have every intention of settling down to rearing a large family; but it is not at all impossible that instead of an even more widespread abandonment of traditional morality in the relations of the sexes, we may be on the edge of a reaction into some new puritanism. Signs of such a reaction are already present, though it has emphatically not yet come.

Christian teaching should be more self-critical when it is running in the same direction as ordinary opinion than when it is running counter to it. In the latter case it comes in for enough criticism from outside to ensure constant testing. Home and family are subjects which have a good press; we ought, therefore, to make sure that Christian teaching on the family is not merely a slightly spiritualized version of what is generally in the air.

Propaganda on behalf of "the family" frequently becomes propaganda for "*my* family." A soldier wrote recently in a daily paper that his ideal wife would be "one whose pride and pleasure it is to keep her home nicer and her family better fed than any other." Underlying this harmless statement is that competitive element between families, which the clever advertiser made use of as he persuaded Mrs. Jones to have a louder loud speaker than Mrs. Smith and a larger refrigerator than Mrs. Brown.

Even if Christians have yielded less than others to this competitive family living in material things, much of our Christian

[1] *Rebuilding Family Life in the Post-War World.* Odhams Press, 2s.

teaching has turned our thoughts too much on ourselves, concentrating our attention on asking what we can do to improve relationships within our own family, to educate our own children rightly, and fulfil our duty as parents or as sons and daughters. A family of unselfish people each living for the rest can achieve *vis-à-vis* society as a whole a degree of selfishness beyond the power of the single individual, a deafness to other claims more impenetrable, because there is the self-satisfaction of unselfishness towards other members of the family.

Duty to family is not an absolute for Christians. The Gospels are full of agonizing conflicts of loyalty between the natural family and the family of God. To be a Christian is to live in a tension with constant moral decisions to be made between our families and the larger community in the use of our time, money and service. We might find that many of our own difficulties were easier to solve if families, as well as individuals, began to look away from themselves to the hopes and needs of others.

The emphasis we most need in Christian teaching now is that Christian people should be stirred to feel passionately and act vigorously on behalf of other people's homes: to recapture now the feelings of sympathy which we had for bombed-out people four years ago, or even last year: to remember that a few sticks of utility furniture, a room or two in someone else's house, or an uncomfortable life in a house condemned long since as unfit for human habitation, is all that many of the bombed-out can call a home. As we talk of family life we need to remember those of the war-married, who have never had a home, and the slum-dwellers who were due for removal before the war and are still living in condemned houses.

Because homes for the people are the basic necessity for rebuilding family life, and because housing will be an acute political issue, I have devoted this week's Supplement to summarizing discussions which have taken place recently in the Christian Frontier Council, which has taken steps to provide itself with some of the best expert advice available on this all-important subject.

RELATIONS WITH RUSSIA

The visit to this country in the present month of a Patriarchal Delegation from the Russian Orthodox Church is a fresh reminder to Christians of the importance of the relations between the two countries, and of the necessity of using means over and above political relationship for promoting mutual understanding.

It is sometimes the simplest and most obvious things that we most need to lay to heart. One of these has been singled out and forcibly presented by Mr. Negley Farson, who has known Russia

for more than thirty years, in an article in the *New English Review*,[1] which makes its appearance in a new form under the editorship of Mr. Douglas Jerrold as a right-wing monthly.

The article begins with a vivid and gruesome description of a Russian trainload of political prisoners standing in a wayside station half-way between Moscow and Murmansk. The conditions were appalling: "I have never seen anything which frightened me so much in my life. It made me sick with fear." Yet bustling Russians went about their jobs apparently indifferent to this human agony. Is this callousness a permanent trait in the Russian character? No, the Russians are fundamentally a great-hearted people. They would be as pleased as anybody to see these political prison trains disappear for ever. How then do these things come about?

The explanation, Mr. Farson believes, is that while the main objective of the U.S.S.R. is to give every Russian the best life possible—at any rate, the best chance to have one—people, human beings, are still looked upon as just part of the great experiment, precisely as a scientist regards the material in his test tube. If an experiment is a failure, he pours the whole lot down the drain. That was Lenin's mentality and indubitably the mentality of Josef Stalin. "Steel is a soft metal compared to the ruthless' discipline which is controlling Soviet Russia now—in civilian as well as army life."

But now comes the point of the article, the Russians know of this far better than we do. They know that human beings simply cannot stand, if it is kept up too long, the tension of totalitarian rule. They know that it has always been a race between making Soviet Russia strong in defence and the nerves of the people. Mr. Farson is convinced that there is a softening process going on in Soviet Russia —a return to the Russian way of life, including a return to religion— and that it will continue if Russia feels it safe to trust the friendship of the outside world.

"I think," Mr. Farson concludes, "that the things which have happened inside Russia during this war show that the Communists will support rather than oppose such a return to the essential Russian way of life. I think that the Russians themselves are anxious to shed the dictatorial rule. And I believe that the greatest barrier to their doing it might come from just us. They will never drop the reins of totalitarian rule in Soviet Russia in an unfriendly world. Genuine friendship felt for Russia by the western nations is an absolutely essential prelude to any lessening of the tension of the Kremlin's rule."

Yours sincerely,

Kathleen Bliss

[1] Eyre & Spottiswoode. 8s. 6d. Annual Subscription 45s., post free.

HOUSES

If every family in this country is to have a separate home we need 1¼ million new dwellings at once, and another 3 million as soon as possible to replace old houses which ought to be demolished now or in the near future. We are now worse off for houses than we were in 1919.

To what is the present shortage due? Before the war our rate of building was a million new dwellings in three years. For more than five years there has been practically no new building and no renewal of wear and tear. Needs are not uniform over the country. Every place has suffered from the suspension of normal building: some from acute overcrowding which will be eased by the end of the war: others are now paying the price of the dilatoriness of their local housing authority in the period between the wars. The Ministry of Health Report on Rural Housing, for example, quotes an area in which the local housing authority, proceeding at its pre-war pace, would have completed its preliminary survey of housing in *seventy years!*

Bombing has, of course, added immensely to our difficulties. Over the whole country 200,000 houses have been destroyed and 250,000 made uninhabitable. The acutest need is that of London. In 1938 there were some 2,000,000 houses in greater London. 100,000 of these have been totally destroyed or damaged beyond repair, that is to say, over 400,000 Londoners have lost their homes. In addition, 50,000 houses were very seriously damaged and made uninhabitable, but capable of repair. Damage in certain large provincial towns was on about the same scale as in London until the arrival of fly-bombs and rockets, which damaged and destroyed about a million houses in Greater London, and made what the authorities had in hand as a compassable scheme of repair, suddenly overwhelmingly difficult. One of the needs, and one which Christians can help to meet, is that the country as a whole should understand and give special weight to the needs of Greater London. Not only has the capital lost by destruction as many houses as the whole of the rest of the country put together, but it suffered its maximum damage at a time when other cities had already been able to do a good deal towards repairing damage and preparing sites for new buildings, both temporary and permanent.

WHAT DOES THIS SHORTAGE MEAN IN HUMAN TERMS?

People must live somewhere: they are therefore crowded into what house-space is available. Houses which ought to have been demolished are still occupied, many of them in shocking condition.

Regulations such as those against sleeping in cellars have gone by the board. Large houses are being sub-divided, and usually it is the type of large house which is already inhabited by several families, and has not been structurally adapted to provide separate dwellings for them, which is further sub-divided. In the opinion of the Ministry of Health these large houses with families occupying one or two rooms without adequate sanitation, water, food and fuel storage, and cooking facilities, are the worst type of slum ; wherever accommodation falls outside the scope of the Rent Restriction Acts, rents have risen steeply.[1] Family incomes, with the lessening of war production and overtime, are beginning to decrease, and the percentage of income available for needs other than rent is beginning to decrease.

There are thousands of personal problems created by housing shortage. Many young wives have lived with their parents for the whole of their married lives. They have never known how to run a house of their own, and a husband may well seem to be an outsider when he returns. The war has effected a levelling process in incomes which is tantamount to a social revolution, and large numbers of houses are now totally unsuited to the way of life of most people.

REBUILDING—AN OPERATION OF WAR

The lessons of the period after the last war ought to be a warning to us. " Homes fit for heroes " became the by-word for unfulfilled political promises, because this slogan was uttered as a lullaby and not as a war cry. Building houses was not looked upon as something demanding the vigour and urgency of an operation of war. In the seventeen months after the end of the war in 1918, local authorities built only 576 houses ; it was the end of 1922 before the total of new houses built by local authorities and private enterprise together reached 200,000. Prices of land and materials soared, and the most conspicuous result which accrued was the cynicism of those who found themselves without the promised new houses. During the inter-war period 72 per cent of the houses which were built were built by private enterprise. The defects of some of these are well-known—lack of planning, jerry-building and the like. Local authority building was marred by oscillations in political policy and in standards, and some of the largest authorities made some of the most crashing errors of judgment.

All these pitfalls we know : perhaps a little too well, for in our anxiety to avoid them all we may very well save ourselves from spoiling the countryside, from perpetrating more Dagenhams, from

[1] Changing conditions make continuous overhaul of Rent Restriction Acts inevitable : the latest survey of conditions is given in the report of the Ridley Committee on Rent Control, April, 1945 (H.M.S.O. 1s.).

ribbon development, from destroying open spaces, from uniform blocks of flats, from jerry-building, from this, that and the other, by the simple expedient of building so few houses as to be hardly noticeable. But let us make no mistake about it—if we do not get the houses in substantial quantities, and within two years from now, no government is going to survive by pleading extenuating circumstances or making diversionary sallies in other directions. Men who have seen Mulberry docks, Pluto pipe lines, pre-fabricated Rhine bridges, and who, having been told "This job is impossible, but you've got to do it," have done it, and done it in less time than that allowed, are not going to believe that the construction of houses is impossible. Still less will they believe it if they see Berlin rebuilt under Russian supervision. At the same time, it is not always clear to those who want "ruthlessness" that the methods of desert warfare might do more harm than good in Hyde Park, and that a ruthless pursuit of some means to solve the immediate housing shortage might land us in even greater difficulties later on. This has indeed already happened: Parliament gave powers last autumn for bombed sites to be acquired for the erection of Portal houses, and astonished and outraged people who hoped to rebuild their destroyed homes after the war are now finding the way barred by a temporary house. This is one of the irremovable limits to a policy of ruthlessness—that temporary buildings must not occupy sites which are needed for permanent buildings.

THE TIME FACTOR—THE NEXT TWO YEARS

One of the most important factors to remember is that of time. We can see what needs to be done much more clearly if we understand that there are two periods, each with very different problems. The next two years constitute a period of emergency which must be regarded as an extension of the emergency of war. During that period it is necessary for the Government to act as though it were what it decidedly is not and should not be in any normal times—a housing authority. It must requisition and direct labour and materials, control prices and act in every way as though this were a war operation. The standard set must be quantity. We shall have to be content with lower standards of quality in this period. Temporary housing is costly—preparing the site for a pre-fabricated house in London may cost anything from £400–£900, a cost not to be contemplated in ordinary times. Yet it offers us the most speedy means of housing large numbers of people in reasonable comfort and privacy with limited labour. Next to temporary houses, the repair of damaged buildings is the quickest means of supplying homes. The great bulk of the damaged houses in London have been made tolerably comfortable, but further repairs are needed to bring them back to a proper standard. The urgency of pressing on with these

repairs is increased by the gradual return of the half-million evacuees who were still out of London on VE day.

The division of large houses into flats may be the most costly of all operations and, if properly done as an architectural job, usually reduces the amount of accommodation. No housing authority can look to this expedient as a simple solution of its problems. Temporary adaptation (extra taps, sanitation, etc.) which does not supply families with privacy may lead to a perpetuation of slum conditions. Local housing authorities are reluctant to assume responsibility for house property which is below standard, and will not do so unless urged by the public. Yet two considerations make it desirable not to leave such expedients out of account. Houses which are already let out to families are going to be further subdivided willy-nilly, and will be worse slums if there is only one tap and one lavatory than if there are three. Houses in better class areas which would hold a dozen people and contain three or four may not offer much scope to a housing authority which has thousands of homeless people on its waiting list, but the undisturbed occupation of a dozen or twenty rooms by four or five people when others are in desperate need is the sort of phenomenon which causes men to see red. Restrictive leases, and even freeholds, prevent willing owners from sub-letting to persons of their own choice ; such restrictions are morally indefensible in a period which is regarded as a national emergency, and there ought to be a breaking-open of the rights of private property to the extent of abrogating such clauses in leases. At the same time the £10 limit on repairs should be relaxed for those people who are willing to turn their houses into temporary flats. Eight-roomed houses divided into two flats make more satisfactory living conditions than larger houses divided into four or more flats.

The difficulties which confront us in this two-year period are numerous, and they are different from those which we shall meet in the long-term.

Land

In regard to land we are in a better position than we were after the last war : local authorities now own sites for 212,000 houses. Sites are developed with roads, services, etc., for 36,000 of these, and contracts are already made for developing another 55,000. The land question does not, therefore, arise for whatever permanent building is done in the two-year period, but it is acute in the case of temporary housing. Sites have to be found which are not wanted for permanent houses ; they are wanted in just the places where land is most expensive, namely in our largest cities. One practical decision we have to come to is whether we will allow temporary

houses to be erected on the fringes of parks and open spaces. Local authorities have been given powers by Parliament to use public spaces for such purposes if it is deemed essential. Building on open spaces is an operation to which such moral stigma now attaches in the mind of at least the educated public that only a conviction that it is an absolute necessity and that it will be genuinely temporary will out-weigh public opposition to this suggestion.

Labour

The acutest problem is that of labour. Before the war there were a million men in the building trade; now there are 337,000. The government plans to bring that figure up to 800,000 within twelve months by demobilization—175,000 men from the Forces in Class A (men demobilized by groups according to age and length of service), 65,000 in Class B (men demobilized for key positions in industry) and 215,000 from industry. There must, of course, be far more than 240,000 building operatives in the Forces; the difficulty, however, is to decide between the urgency of the housing situation and equity of demobilization. It is greatly to be hoped that the opinion of men in the Forces, who no doubt want to get home and want houses to get home to, is being sounded on this point and that equity will be regarded as a guiding principle rather than an immovable barrier.

Materials

The control of prices of building materials will continue during the emergency period, no matter what the political views of the party in power may be. Much has been said about the merits of this and that design of building, and one has more than a suspicion that time is lost because designers do not curb their bright ideas on a better position for the larder. Design is fascinating; but we have to decide to accept masses of one design or to suffer delay while it is being changed.

ARE WE GOING TO GET WHAT WE NEED?

During this two years we need one and a quarter million houses. If demobilization proceeds according to plan we shall have in two years 220,000 new houses built and 80,000 in course of building, and at least 145,000 temporary houses. This is short of requirements. Yet the long debate on housing in the House of Commons on March 23rd produced agitated speeches, but no concrete suggestions as to how this figure can be stepped up. Spokes in the wheels have not been lacking—an absurd press agitation prevented prisoners of war from beginning the preparation of sites many weeks ago, and pressing on from using them on site preparation to the actual brick laying is one means of making a turn of speed. It is urgent too that progress with work in hand should not be delayed by political

polemics, and that the election promises on the subject of housing should be checked against the facts which make them possible or impossible to fulfil.

LONG-TERM HOUSING—THE NEXT TEN YEARS

When we come to look at housing policy for the next ten years, quite different criteria should prevail. Conditions will have changed in all respects. Five years hence the number of building operatives, including trainees as well as demobilized men, should be approaching the one and a quarter million at which the present Government intends to maintain it. The great difficulty will then be land, finance and planning. On the matter of land, urgent decisions on major lines of policy ought to be taken immediately to enable local authorities to acquire land for long-term schemes. Local authorities already have power to acquire land on a compulsory purchase order from the Ministry of Health, but they must pay for it at a price fixed, either by agreement with the seller or by arbitration on the basis of a willing seller and a willing buyer. Until Parliamentary decisions are taken on the White Paper on Control of Land Use, including compensation and betterment, no local authority can plan far ahead with certainty. Housing finance is another cause of uncertainty. Local authorities have to raise the capital for building houses on loan. If the rent were fixed at an amount which would cover interest and amortization on the loan and meet current expenses for management and repairs, the rent would normally be far above the figure which is arrived at by taking the percentage of a family's income which should be spent in rent as 15 per cent. This gap has to be closed by subsidy out of taxes and rates. The burden on the rates is one of the major difficulties of rural housing where rents, like wages, are low ; but it applies also to the centres of cities where the cost of land is high. The present terms on which local authorities can borrow for housing purposes from the Public Works Loans Commissioners are 3⅛ per cent—a small fraction above the terms on which the Government itself can borrow for similar periods. The rate of interest could be brought down, or reduced to nil. This would greatly reduce the costs which the rent must cover. But since the Government has to borrow what it lends, such a reduction of interest would in fact be a further Government subsidy at the taxpayer's expense. When these facts have been explained they have not been removed. High interest rates mean high rents ; subsidies mean higher taxes. But, as the debate on the Local Authorities Loans Bill in the House of Commons on January 24th of this year clearly showed, there is no clear and obvious case for one or the other, for some local authorities are able to borrow cheaper than the fixed 3⅛ per cent rate.

The next ten years must see a speedy return to higher standards in housing. Local authorities must reinforce lapsed regulations and constantly replace derelict or unsuitable housing by better. Local authorities are the servants of the public, the representative of that meagre 25 or 30 per cent of the electorate who trouble to use their vote. They are there to do the work the public wants, and a return to good standards depends very much on the degree of public interest and insistence which is forthcoming.

Standards must be enforced from within the building industry. Schemes for preventing jerry-building by fixing standards of construction are already under discussion. The room for improvement in taste, both in builders and in their masters, the public, can hardly be doubted. The building industry offers greater temptations to slackness, to "rings" and to evasions than almost any other industry. Fewer industries can show so marked a contrast between the good and the bad. The whole industry will be on trial before the public by its performance within inevitable limitations.

We need in this period to go all out for the bold and comprehensive vision. If we are to have satellite towns and prevent a further period of urban sprawl, they must be embarked upon as whole schemes. The people will not go to live in them if there is no work, nor will industries thrive in them if there are no houses for work-people. The difficulty about them is that they involve negotiation with the Ministries of Health, Labour, Works and Transport, and the Board of Trade. There is a case for setting up a national corporation, and an equally strong one for finishing off the satellite towns which we already have at Welwyn and Letchworth. We want to see new kinds of housing estates, with mixed populations and varieties of dwellings. In London we have the priceless opportunity of making whole new estates well within the county boundaries on cleared bombed areas, which will take account of the faults of the older ones and the thinking which has been done in the meantime. Other cities, notably Coventry, are planning to have housing estates near their centres. Ninety per cent of those who are asked prefer houses to flats: most of these 90 per cent also want to live near their work. In any city this is an irreconcilable choice of opposites—there is not the land. Yet in this clearly and frequently reiterated preference for living near work there are sociological benefits which may not be obvious to those whose motive is mainly to save time and money spent in travel. If we could plan housing and industry so that people could live near their work we should alter the pattern of home life, giving people more time at home, including a possible break in the middle of the day. We should also recover for new neighbourhoods some of the benefits of the close-knit communities of the industrial north, where people who

work together, also live together and share common interests to a far greater degree.

CONCLUSION

It is impossible in the limits of a single Supplement to do more than trace the outlines of so vast a subject as the housing of a nation. This is one of the major issues of domestic policy which the new Government when it is elected will have to face. It is so obvious a one that no party can avoid making promises and hurling criticisms. Whatever the party which has to shoulder this responsibility, several things are clear. We need a sustained policy and not a series of violent changes of objective; we have to seek to improve, perhaps by drastic means, what has been undertaken and not to attempt the impossible task of beginning *de novo* on some so-called master plan. We need a close understanding between Whitehall and the local authorities throughout the country. Commenting on housing policy in this country, an American expert remarked a few weeks ago that although mass production and large-scale planning in America had great advantages, he considered that our methods of leaving the maximum possible degree of initiative to local authorities led to better results. But whether local government can or cannot execute this gigantic task depends on the quality of people whom we send to our local councils and the degree of informed support which they receive.

The Ministry of Health has published during the past year four admirable reports on housing.[1] The Housing Centre [2] will answer questions, has an excellent library, and lends and organizes exhibitions on housing. Perhaps the most useful knowledge we possess is of our own locality. During the war civil defence services have amassed a large and detailed knowledge of housing conditions which should not be left to rot, but should be directed to stirring local interest and informing local councils.

K. B.

[1] "The Housing Manual," "Rural Housing," "Private Enterprise Housing," "Design for Dwelling" (Dudleigh Committee Report), at 2s. each H.M.S.O.

[2] Chairman, Sir Patrick Abercrombie, 13 Suffolk Street, W. 1.

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